

(SunshineStateNews.com)

Unlike GOP leaders who soft-pedal issue, Reps. West and Southerland spoil for a fight

By: Kenric Ward

Two "tea party stars" from Florida say they're not scared by the doomsday scenarios over the national debt ceiling.

Saying he doesn't think much of "leadership by fear and intimidation" coming from the Obama administration and Wall Street financiers, U.S. Rep. Allen West calls the pending increase in the nation's \$14 trillion debt a "debt suggestion."

"This will be the 73rd or 74th time Congress has done this," West, R-Fort Lauderdale, said on ABC's "This Week with Christian Amanpour."

U.S. Rep. Steve Southerland, R-Tallahassee, was equally adamant.

"The administration is pushing for a single-subject vote, a 'clean' bill. I'm not voting for that," Southerland said.

"We want guarantees going forward that we will service our debt, like any banker."

Both West and Southerland, who were branded "tea party stars" by Amanpour, say they want more than token "sweeteners" as a condition of their vote.

"The administration has proposed nothing to provide guarantees to satisfy our debt long-term," Southerland said.

Bucking their fellow Republicans from Florida, both first-term congressmen voted against last week's stopgap budget measure that called for \$39 billion in spending cuts. West said such an amount pales in comparison to the government's \$1.65 trillion deficit, which is growing by the day.

"We've got to be fiscally responsible and right now we're not showing that to the American people," West said.

With the next debt deadline approaching next month, House Republicans are under increasing pressure to raise the ceiling for continued borrowing. U.S. Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner and Wall Street financiers say failure to up the limit will result in widespread defaults.

Fearing the fiscal ramifications of that scenario -- as they feared the political blowback of a government shutdown during this month's wrangle over the short-term spending bill -- GOP leaders have indicated they will cede ground on the debt limit and make their stand on Rep. Paul Ryan's budget.

But while the rest of Florida's Republican and Democratic congressmen are expected to again follow their leaders, West and Southerland aren't falling in line. Both were elected last fall with strong backing from Florida's tea party movement.

They say they intend to honor their commitment to fiscal conservatism, and not be cowed by threats from Wall Street or the White House.

West says he continues to push for a balanced-budget amendment that contains strict spending controls.

"I'd like to see [government spending] around 20 percent of GDP. The president is looking at 25-to-26 percent," West said. To ensure that taxes aren't raised to cover future debt, the retired Army lieutenant colonel proposes a "trigger" that would automatically impose spending cuts as the debt limit is approached.

West also wants to halve the federal corporate tax, which is the highest in the industrialized world.

Southerland said fundamental reforms and cuts in entitlement programs are essential -- sooner, not later.

"You don't expect to be applauded for everything you do. It's a difficult decision. I may lose in 2012, but I won't lose me," he said.

Tea party groups hail West and Southerland for bucking party leaders and not buying into the fear purveyed by Wall Street.

"This is the same kind of fear-mongering we heard to justify the corporate bailouts and TARP [toxic-asset relief program]," said one activist, who declined to be named.

One national tea party group, Tea Party Patriots, has launched a campaign to counterweigh the pressure being applied by GOP leaders.

Mark Meckler said his Tea Party Patriots group would actively recruit challengers to GOP congressmen who fail to aggressively reduce deficits and debt through spending cuts.

Steve Stanek, a policy analyst at the conservative Heartland Institute in Illinois, said Geithner is "spinning fantasies" that can be knocked down by deep, immediate spending cuts.

"They're lying," Stanek said of officials' apocalyptic scenarios. "There are all sorts of things that can be done. Instead of raising the debt limit or defaulting, you can control spending."

Fueled by record spending by the Obama administration, the U.S. debt has ballooned from \$9.6 trillion to more than \$14 trillion in two years. By comparison, the nation's debt was \$2.8 trillion at the end of the Reagan administration.

"Now they want to make it even bigger, and it's simply unsustainable," Stanek said.

"At some point, the Fed won't be able to print enough money to buy the debt. China, Germany and Japan won't continue to buy our debt because they're not sure they will get paid back. Or if they do, it will be in greatly devalued dollars. That's the greater threat."

Ironically, many of those same arguments were used by then-Sen. Barack Obama, who spoke and voted against raising the debt limit back in 2004.